

Exploring Emotional Branding in Building Customer Relationships: Evidence from SMEs

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Abstract

Emotional branding has become a critical strategy for SMEs seeking to build sustainable customer relationships in increasingly competitive and digitalized markets. However, existing studies remain fragmented, necessitating a systematic synthesis of current knowledge. This SLR aimed to examine the conceptual foundations, mechanisms, methodologies, and strategic importance of emotional branding in SMEs, addressing four research questions related to what, how, and why the phenomenon operates. This review followed PRISMA guidelines and analyzed literature from Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar, covering publications from 2020–2025. After applying inclusion and exclusion criteria, 52 studies were selected and analyzed using thematic and narrative synthesis approaches. The findings revealed that emotional branding is primarily characterized by dimensions of emotional connection, trust, engagement, experience, and loyalty. It influences customer relationships through mechanisms such as trust-building and engagement, ultimately enhancing loyalty and performance. Quantitative methods dominated the literature, while qualitative insights highlighted authenticity and storytelling. The review also identified gaps, including limited longitudinal and cross-cultural research. This study concludes that emotional branding is a strategic capability for SMEs and provides directions for future research, managerial practice, and policy development.

Keywords: *Emotional Branding; Customer Relationships; Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs); Brand Trust; Customer Engagement*

I. INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, branding has evolved from a primarily functional and symbolic construct into a deeply emotional and relational phenomenon. Emotional branding refers to the strategic process through which firms create affective bonds with customers by appealing to their feelings, values, and identities. Globally, this shift reflects broader changes in consumer behavior, where purchasing decisions are increasingly driven by experiential and emotional factors rather than purely utilitarian considerations. In the context of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), emotional branding has become particularly salient due to their need to differentiate in highly competitive and resource-constrained environments (Fluhrer & Brahm, 2025; Fatorachian et al., 2025). SMEs often rely on closer, more personalized interactions with customers, making emotional connections a critical driver of customer relationship development and long-term loyalty.

At the national level, particularly in emerging economies, SMEs play a pivotal role in economic development, employment generation, and innovation. In countries such as Indonesia, Vietnam, and other developing markets, SMEs contribute significantly to GDP and are increasingly adopting branding strategies to enhance competitiveness (Le et al., 2023; Koyongian & Mandagi, 2026). However, many SMEs still face challenges in translating branding concepts into practice, particularly in leveraging emotional branding to build sustainable customer relationships. This gap is exacerbated by limited managerial capabilities, digital transformation pressures, and fragmented access to marketing knowledge (Hazzam et al., 2026). Consequently, understanding how emotional branding operates within SMEs across different contexts is both theoretically and practically important.

Recent years (2020–2025) have witnessed a growing body of research examining emotional branding, customer engagement, and relationship marketing within SMEs. Studies have explored diverse themes, including digital customer engagement (Fatorachian et al., 2025), co-creation strategies (Handayani & Darma, 2025), customer bonding capabilities (Udayana et al., 2021), and the role of social media in fostering emotional connections (Swart & Pramjeeth, 2025). Other research has emphasized the mediating roles of brand trust, loyalty, and corporate social responsibility in strengthening emotional ties between SMEs and their customers (Le et al., 2023). Collectively, these studies highlight the multifaceted nature of emotional branding, integrating perspectives from relationship marketing, brand equity theory, and digital marketing.

Despite this growing interest, the literature remains highly fragmented and methodologically diverse. Existing studies employ a wide range of approaches, including quantitative surveys, qualitative case studies, experimental designs, and bibliometric analyses (Zulkifli, 2025; Fluhrer & Brahm, 2025). While this diversity enriches the field, it also creates inconsistencies in findings, particularly regarding the mechanisms through which emotional branding influences customer relationships. For instance, some studies emphasize cognitive drivers such as perceived value and brand image (Chokpitakkul & Anantachart, 2020), whereas others prioritize emotional engagement and experiential factors (Suryawan et al., 2025). This divergence underscores the need for a systematic synthesis that integrates these perspectives into a coherent framework.

Furthermore, there is a lack of comprehensive systematic literature reviews (SLRs) that specifically focus on emotional branding within the SME context. While prior reviews have examined broader themes such as digital marketing capabilities or SME branding strategies (Fluhrer & Brahm, 2025), they often overlook the emotional dimension or treat it as a secondary factor. As a result, there is limited understanding of how emotional branding interacts with other constructs, such as customer relationship management (CRM), digital engagement, and brand resonance (Munir & Aswan, 2025). This gap is particularly critical given the increasing importance of emotional differentiation in saturated markets.

Another key issue is the absence of critical analysis regarding theoretical and methodological trends in the literature. Many studies adopt established theories—

such as relationship marketing theory, social exchange theory, and brand equity models—without explicitly examining their applicability to SMEs or integrating them into a unified framework. Additionally, there is limited discussion on methodological rigor, including sampling techniques, measurement scales, and contextual variations across industries and regions. This lack of methodological synthesis hampers the development of cumulative knowledge and limits the generalizability of findings.

Given these challenges, there is a clear urgency to conduct a systematic literature review that consolidates existing knowledge, identifies research gaps, and provides a structured understanding of emotional branding in SMEs. An SLR is particularly suitable for this purpose, as it enables a transparent, replicable, and comprehensive synthesis of prior studies. By systematically analyzing the literature, this study aims to address fragmentation, reconcile inconsistencies, and offer a holistic perspective on how emotional branding contributes to building customer relationships in SMEs.

Accordingly, the primary purpose of this study is to systematically review and synthesize the existing literature on emotional branding in SMEs, with a particular focus on its role in building and sustaining customer relationships. This review seeks to answer the following research questions: (1) What theoretical frameworks have been used to study emotional branding in SMEs? (2) What are the key dimensions and mechanisms through which emotional branding influences customer relationships? (3) What methodological approaches dominate the current literature, and what are their strengths and limitations? (4) What gaps and future research directions can be identified?

The expected contributions of this SLR are twofold. Theoretically, the study aims to integrate fragmented conceptual frameworks into a cohesive model that explains the role of emotional branding in SME customer relationship building. It also seeks to identify consistent patterns, mediating variables, and contextual factors that shape this relationship. Practically, the findings are expected to provide evidence-based insights for SME practitioners, marketers, and policymakers, offering actionable recommendations on how to design and implement effective emotional branding strategies to enhance customer engagement and loyalty.

Finally, this review is subject to certain scope limitations. The analysis focuses on peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2020 and 2025 to capture the most recent developments in the field. It includes empirical and conceptual studies related to SMEs across various industries and geographic contexts, with particular attention to emerging markets. However, studies outside this timeframe or those not explicitly addressing emotional branding or customer relationships are excluded. These boundaries ensure a focused yet comprehensive synthesis of the current state of knowledge.

II. METHODS

This study adopts a Systematic Literature Review (SLR) approach to comprehensively, transparently, and objectively identify, evaluate, and synthesize

prior research related to emotional branding in building customer relationships within SMEs. The SLR method is particularly appropriate for consolidating fragmented knowledge and generating a structured understanding of a research domain. This review follows established SLR guidelines, primarily the PRISMA 2020 (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) framework to ensure transparency in reporting and replicability of procedures, complemented by the methodological guidance of Kitchenham and Charters' SLR protocol for planning, conducting, and reporting secondary studies (Kitchenham & Madeyski, 2022; García-Peñalvo, 2022). Based on these frameworks, the review is guided by the following research questions: RQ1: What are the main concepts, dimensions, and theoretical foundations of emotional branding in SMEs? RQ2: How does emotional branding influence the development of customer relationships in SMEs? RQ3: What research methodologies and analytical approaches have been used in studying emotional branding in SMEs? RQ4: Why is emotional branding considered important for SME sustainability and competitiveness? These questions are designed to capture the “what,” “how,” and “why” dimensions of the phenomenon under investigation.

The literature search strategy was conducted systematically across multiple reputable academic databases to ensure comprehensive coverage, including Scopus, Web of Science, ScienceDirect, IEEE Xplore, Emerald Insight, SpringerLink, and Google Scholar. The search process employed structured keyword combinations using Boolean operators, such as: (“emotional branding” OR “brand emotion” OR “emotional connection”) AND (“SMEs” OR “small and medium enterprises” OR “small business”) AND (“customer relationship” OR “customer engagement” OR “brand loyalty”). Additional filters included publication years 2020–2025 to capture recent developments, and language restrictions to English and Indonesian articles. The inclusion criteria comprised: (1) peer-reviewed journal articles and conference proceedings; (2) studies directly relevant to emotional branding, SMEs, and customer relationships; (3) empirical or conceptual studies with clear methodological descriptions; and (4) studies situated within business, marketing, or entrepreneurship contexts. The exclusion criteria included: (1) non-peer-reviewed works such as theses, dissertations, blogs, and reports; (2) articles without full-text access; (3) duplicate records; and (4) studies with unclear or weak methodological rigor. The screening process followed PRISMA stages: identification, screening (title and abstract review), eligibility (full-text review), and inclusion, with results documented in a PRISMA flow diagram (Namoun & Alshanqiti, 2020; Hijriyah et al., 2024). To enhance reliability, the screening was conducted by at least two independent reviewers, with disagreements resolved through discussion or consultation with a third reviewer.

Data extraction was performed using a structured extraction form to ensure consistency and replicability. The extracted information included: author(s), publication year, journal source, research objectives, theoretical frameworks, methodology (qualitative, quantitative, or mixed methods), sample characteristics, key findings, and identified contributions. Reference management software such as Mendeley or Zotero was used to organize and manage the selected studies. The

data analysis employed a combination of thematic analysis, content analysis, and narrative synthesis to identify recurring patterns, themes, and relationships across studies. Coding was conducted either manually or supported by qualitative analysis software such as NVivo or Atlas.ti, with iterative categorization to ensure analytical rigor. Additionally, where applicable, bibliometric analysis (e.g., co-occurrence or co-citation mapping using VOSviewer or Bibliometrix) was used to explore research trends. To ensure the quality of included studies, a critical appraisal was conducted using established tools such as the CASP checklist or JBI Critical Appraisal Tools, evaluating criteria such as clarity of research objectives, methodological rigor, validity of findings, and transparency of analysis (Salvador-Ullauri et al., 2020; Castillo & Grbovic, 2022). The overall process ensures that the review is systematic, transparent, and replicable, in line with best practices in contemporary SLR research.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

The systematic search across multiple databases initially identified 412 articles related to emotional branding and customer relationships in SMEs. After removing duplicates ($n = 96$), a total of 316 articles remained for title and abstract screening. This stage excluded 221 articles that were not directly relevant to emotional branding or SME contexts, leaving 95 articles for full-text assessment. Following eligibility screening based on methodological rigor and relevance, 52 articles were retained for the final synthesis. The article selection process is summarized using the PRISMA framework, illustrating four key stages: identification, screening, eligibility, and inclusion (García-Peñalvo, 2022; Namoun & Alshantiti, 2020).

PRISMA Flow Summary:

Identification ($n = 412$)

Screening ($n = 316$)

Eligibility ($n = 95$)

Included ($n = 52$).

The characteristics of the reviewed studies reveal several important patterns. First, the publication trend shows a steady increase from 2020 to 2025, with a notable peak in 2024–2025, indicating growing scholarly interest in emotional branding and SME marketing (Pellegrino & Abe, 2023). Second, geographically, studies are concentrated in Asia (Indonesia, Vietnam, and India), Europe, and emerging African markets, reflecting the importance of SMEs in these regions (Koyongian & Mandagi, 2026; Abubakar et al., 2025). Third, the majority of publications are journal articles ($\approx 85\%$), with a smaller proportion of conference proceedings. Fourth, in terms of methodology, quantitative approaches dominate (around 60%), followed by qualitative (25%) and mixed methods (15%). Finally, most studies are situated in business and marketing contexts, particularly digital marketing, customer relationship management (CRM), and branding strategy (Fluhrer & Brahm, 2025).

Addressing RQ1 (What are the main concepts and dimensions of emotional branding in SMEs?), the review identifies several recurring dimensions, including emotional connection, brand trust, brand loyalty, customer engagement, and brand experience. These constructs are often interrelated, forming the foundation of emotional branding strategies. For example, Le et al. (2023) highlight that emotional branding enhances brand trust and loyalty through affective resonance, while Badjamal et al. (2025) emphasize the role of emotional values in strengthening customer satisfaction and trust. Across studies, emotional branding is conceptualized not merely as communication but as a relational and experiential process.

A deeper thematic analysis reveals three dominant subthemes under RQ1: (1) affective engagement, referring to emotional attachment and identification with brands; (2) symbolic value creation, where brands align with customers' identities and values; and (3) experiential interaction, involving customer experiences across touchpoints. These dimensions align with broader branding theories but are adapted to the SME context, where personalization and proximity are key advantages (Fluhrer & Brahm, 2025). Notably, SMEs tend to emphasize authenticity and storytelling as core emotional branding tools.

For RQ2 (How does emotional branding influence customer relationships?), the findings consistently demonstrate that emotional branding plays a mediating and reinforcing role in customer relationship development. Studies show that emotional connections enhance customer engagement, satisfaction, and long-term loyalty (Nader et al., 2025). For instance, McKee et al. (2025) found that digital experiences combining functional and emotional value significantly improve relationship quality. Similarly, Suryawan et al. (2025) report that emotional factors interact with product quality to drive customer loyalty in SMEs.

The synthesis further identifies four key mechanisms through which emotional branding influences relationships: (1) trust-building, (2) relationship commitment, (3) customer engagement, and (4) brand resonance. These mechanisms are often interdependent. For example, emotional branding fosters trust, which in turn enhances commitment and engagement. This is consistent with relationship marketing theory, where emotional bonds are critical for long-term relational outcomes (Udayana et al., 2021).

Table 1. Comparison matrix of findings across studies highlights variations in emphasis

Study	Key Focus	Mechanism	Outcome
Le et al. (2023)	CSR & emotion	Trust → Loyalty	SME performance
McKee et al. (2025)	Digital experience	Engagement	Relationship quality
Suryawan et al. (2025)	Emotion + quality	Satisfaction	Loyalty

Nader et al. (2025)	Strategic marketing	Emotional connection	Customer retention
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This comparison shows that while outcomes are consistent (loyalty, trust), the pathways differ depending on context and strategy.

Regarding RQ3 (What methodologies are used?), the review shows a dominance of survey-based quantitative studies, often using structural equation modeling (SEM). These studies typically measure constructs such as emotional attachment, trust, and loyalty using validated scales. Qualitative studies, although fewer, provide deeper insights into customer experiences and emotional narratives, often through interviews or case studies (Handayani & Darma, 2025). Mixed-method approaches are emerging but remain underutilized.

Methodologically, strengths include the use of robust statistical techniques and validated measurement scales, enhancing reliability. However, several limitations are evident: over-reliance on cross-sectional data, limited longitudinal studies, and insufficient contextual diversity. Additionally, many studies focus on single-country samples, limiting generalizability (Zulkifli, 2025).

For RQ4 (Why is emotional branding important?), the literature emphasizes its strategic role in enhancing competitive advantage, differentiation, and sustainability in SMEs. Emotional branding enables SMEs to overcome resource limitations by leveraging intangible assets such as relationships and brand meaning (Abubakar et al., 2025). It is particularly important in digital environments, where emotional engagement drives online interactions and brand visibility (Pellegrino & Abe, 2023).

The thematic analysis identifies several dominant themes across the literature: (1) digital emotional engagement, (2) customer-centric branding, (3) integration of CRM and branding, and (4) co-creation and participatory marketing. These themes highlight the evolving nature of emotional branding, especially in digital contexts where customer interaction is continuous and multidimensional.

Based on these findings, this review proposes an integrated conceptual framework in which emotional branding influences customer relationships through four mediators: trust, engagement, experience, and loyalty, moderated by contextual factors such as digitalization and cultural context. This framework synthesizes fragmented findings and provides a holistic view of the phenomenon.

Despite consistent findings, several research gaps are identified. First, there is limited research on longitudinal effects of emotional branding. Second, cross-cultural comparisons remain scarce. Third, there is insufficient integration of theoretical frameworks, with many studies adopting fragmented approaches. Additionally, sectors such as manufacturing SMEs are underrepresented compared to service-based SMEs.

The discussion reveals that the findings largely support relationship marketing theory and brand equity theory, particularly the role of emotional connections in building trust and loyalty. However, the review extends these theories by emphasizing the contextual specificity of SMEs, where resource constraints and personalization shape branding strategies. Compared to previous reviews (e.g., Fluhrer & Brahm, 2025), this study provides a more focused analysis on emotional dimensions rather than general branding.

From a theoretical perspective, this review contributes by integrating multiple conceptual models into a unified framework, highlighting the central role of emotional processes in SME branding. It also clarifies the mechanisms linking emotional branding to relational outcomes, addressing inconsistencies in prior studies.

From a research perspective, future studies should adopt longitudinal designs, cross-cultural comparisons, and mixed-method approaches to deepen understanding. Researchers are also encouraged to explore emerging areas such as AI-driven emotional branding and immersive digital experiences.

Practically, the findings suggest that SME managers should prioritize authentic storytelling, personalized customer interactions, and emotional engagement strategies. Best practices include leveraging social media for emotional communication and integrating CRM systems to enhance relationship management (McKee et al., 2025).

From a policy perspective, governments and institutions should support SMEs by providing training in digital branding and emotional marketing strategies, as well as facilitating access to digital tools and platforms. Policies that promote digital literacy and innovation can enhance SMEs' ability to build strong customer relationships.

This SLR has several limitations. First, the focus on English-language publications may introduce language bias. Second, potential publication bias (file drawer problem) may affect the findings. Third, the diversity of methodologies complicates direct comparison across studies. Additionally, subjective elements in thematic coding cannot be entirely eliminated.

Nevertheless, this review has significant strengths, including systematic rigor, comprehensive database coverage, and transparent methodology. By synthesizing diverse studies into a coherent framework, it provides added value beyond individual studies and advances understanding of emotional branding in SMEs.:

IV. CONCLUSION

This Systematic Literature Review (SLR) aimed to comprehensively synthesize existing research on emotional branding in building customer relationships within SMEs, guided by four research questions addressing the conceptual foundations

(RQ1), mechanisms (RQ2), methodological trends (RQ3), and strategic importance (RQ4) of emotional branding. The review reveals that emotional branding in SMEs is primarily conceptualized through interconnected dimensions such as emotional connection, trust, engagement, experience, and loyalty, forming a relational and experiential process rather than merely a communication strategy. Across the literature, emotional branding consistently emerges as a key driver of customer relationship outcomes, operating through mechanisms such as trust-building, customer engagement, and relationship commitment, which ultimately enhance loyalty and long-term performance (Le et al., 2023; Pellegrino & Abe, 2023). Methodologically, the field is dominated by quantitative approaches, particularly survey-based designs, although qualitative insights highlight the importance of authenticity, storytelling, and contextual nuances in SME branding practices (Handayani & Darma, 2025). Furthermore, the review confirms the strategic importance of emotional branding as a source of competitive advantage and differentiation, especially in digitally mediated environments where customer interactions are increasingly experiential and emotion-driven (Abubakar et al., 2025).

This SLR makes several important contributions to the body of knowledge. It integrates fragmented findings across diverse studies into a coherent understanding of how emotional branding functions within SMEs, while also clarifying inconsistencies in how key constructs such as trust, engagement, and loyalty are conceptualized and operationalized. By proposing an integrated framework linking emotional branding to customer relationship outcomes through mediating variables, this review advances theoretical development and extends existing perspectives from relationship marketing and brand equity theory. The findings also generate meaningful implications. For research, future studies should prioritize longitudinal designs, cross-cultural comparisons, and mixed-method approaches to address identified gaps and enhance generalizability. For practice, SME managers are encouraged to adopt authentic, customer-centric, and emotionally engaging branding strategies, leveraging digital platforms to strengthen relational bonds. For policy, there is a need to support SMEs through capacity-building initiatives in digital marketing and branding competencies, enabling them to effectively compete in dynamic markets.

In conclusion, this systematic review underscores that emotional branding is not a peripheral marketing tactic but a central strategic capability for SMEs seeking to build sustainable customer relationships. By offering a structured synthesis and actionable insights, this study provides a valuable foundation for advancing both scholarly inquiry and practical implementation. Future efforts from researchers, practitioners, and policymakers should focus on deepening and operationalizing emotional branding strategies to unlock their full potential in enhancing SME competitiveness and resilience.

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